

ATTACHMENT #4
RONALD SIKES INTERVIEW

(17 Pages)



NTSB

National Transportation Safety Board

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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

HWY-05-MH-035 — Wilmer, TX

DATE: Wednesday, September 28, 2005

LOCATION: [REDACTED]

PRESENT: Ronald Sikes (Witness); Dallas Sheriff's Deputy Kevin Feinglas; NTSB Investigators Joseph Kolly and Paula Sind-Prunier

RECORDING DURATION: 0:23:34

WITNESS: S-I-K-E-S

DEPUTY FEINGLAS: And your birthday?

WITNESS: [REDACTED]

DEPUTY FEINGLAS: Okay.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Mr. Sikes, what's your occupation?

WITNESS: I'm a craft superintendent for Archer Western, contractors.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay, so you're in construction work?

WITNESS: Yes.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: We're interested in what you saw, and heard, and came to understand about the accident—the fire. If you could perhaps tell us a little bit about where you were, where you were coming from, where you were going, and how you came upon the accident scene—and what you can tell us.

WITNESS: Okay. Living here in [REDACTED] I travel 45 going North to Dallas. And, somewhere around Trumbull, is the first time that I got up behind the bus. And at

that time, there was some sparks, which I thought were from the exhaust pipe— Because sometimes with diesels, they get some carbon buildup, and they throw some sparks out their exhaust—and I didn't think anything about it. And I kept traveling Northbound, and sometime or another, the bus got up in front of me because I got slowed down by the traffic that was traveling about 45 miles an hour. And, as we got closer to Wilmer, I could see the bus in front of me and there was a man driving a white box truck—I say a man—a person driving a white box truck, approximately a thirty-footer, 36-foot box truck. White, no decals on the sides that I saw. He was flashing his lights. And I knew then there was probably some kind of trouble with the bus. So I passed him, and there was a red Grand Am that was in front of me in that lane, and it had—I had to wait on it to get by before I could get in front of the bus. And when I got up beside the bus, I looked over at the rear right axle and it was forge red, I mean, almost yellow from heat. And at that point, I proceeded to get over into the left hand lane in front of the bus and started braking, and it was at the CTB wall barrier there at Wilmer and approximately, I'm guessing 300 or 400 feet, I don't know, I finally had him stopped in the fast lane. And I stopped and got out of my vehicle, went over to the driver's side window, and he had the little window that opened up, and I told him, I said, your right rear axle is red hot—it's almost on fire. About that time, a lady on the passenger side in an orange pantsuit, or a red pantsuit, or something like that, stood up and leaned toward the driver. And I said, I think you have a problem with your brakes, and when I said that, he reached up with his right hand toward the dash on the right side, I don't know if it was the radio, or what he was

doing, but, he didn't make any movements until I said something about his brakes. And then at that point, that's when I saw his right hand move toward the dash. So after I told him what the problem was and everything, I figured that he would get out and inspect what I told him, and I should have, in hindsight, should have made him get off the bus. But I went back to my vehicle, and started Northbound, going back to Dallas. And, in my rearview mirror, I kept looking back, and I never seen him get off the bus. And it looked like the bus was making forward motion, but I'm not real sure on that. But, I think it was about Pleasant Run when I seen sirens, or lights from a police car, coming across the highway and back down on the southbound lane. And then I figured then there was either an accident, and I might have caused it by stopping the bus, or—I didn't know the bus was on fire at that time. I didn't know until my wife called me at work and said that there'd been a bus explosion on I-45, and I told her, I said, yeah, I'm the one that stopped the bus and told him he had problems with his rear axle. And that's basically—pretty much all I know.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay. When you initially came upon him, was he in the right lane or the left lane?

WITNESS: When I first, got behind him he was in—I'm thinking the center lane when I first seen the sparks—that's down, sort of near Trumbull or somewhere in that area.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: And then when you passed him, did you pass him on the left or on the right?

WITNESS: He was in the left-hand lane when I passed him, I was in the center lane. I had to come around—the bus was here (gesturing), the white box truck was here (indicating behind the location of the bus), I was behind the box truck, and what really got my attention was that he (referring to the box truck) was flashing his lights, and I knew the bus was having problems, and so I went around him as soon as I could. I got up beside him, I looked at his axle, and it was glowing red—like the sun.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay, which axle was that—

WITNESS: It was the right—it would have been the right axle, and I believe it was the rear wheel. I think I'm correct about that.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay.

WITNESS: As soon as I seen it I, I sped up as fast as I could and got in front of him, and it took me about—I'm guessing—200 or 250 foot to get him stopped—safety. I didn't want to just go up there and lock my brakes up.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay. And so you dropped—you hit your brakes, slowed down—

WITNESS: I hit my brakes to let him know that—signaled him with my brake lights to let him know that I was slowing down, and getting him to slow down.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay, and then he pulled off onto the—

WITNESS: No, he never did pull off. He stayed in the—actually in the lane.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: He stayed in the lane?

WITNESS: Yes. Neither one of us moved out of the left lane.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay. And so, you remained in the left lane.

WITNESS: We might have been across the line a little bit, but it wasn't—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: But you hadn't totally pulled off so that traffic
could continue—

WITNESS: No. Right. Right.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: And then you got out, went around to the driver's
side window—

WITNESS: Right. I actually left my truck from the side and went to his window.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay. So you got out—

WITNESS: —I actually had to knock on the window to even get him to open it.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay, so you knocked on the window?

WITNESS: I started to, and about that time when he seen my hand come up, that's when
he opened the window.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay, he opened the window. And do you recall
what you said to him?

WITNESS: I said, your right rear axle is—red hot. Almost on fire. That's what I told
him. And, there again, I work with Hispanic people all day, and I should have
recognized the sign that—No hablo inglais. But I didn't.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: So he didn't say anything to you?

WITNESS: He didn't say a word.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay.

WITNESS: Now the lady that stood up and was on his right side, was leaning in towards
where she could hear, and I don't know if she had anything to do with the bus, or

the people being transferred, but she was in a red—either a red or an orange pantsuit, or—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Do you know—was she Caucasian, or Black, or Hispanic?

WITNESS: She was either Black or Hispanic—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay.

WITNESS: —and I'm thinking Hispanic, but I'm not sure.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: And, she didn't speak with you at all?

WITNESS: No.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Did she say anything to the driver?

WITNESS: Not that I seen—as soon as I told them what I said and everything, I was kind of in a hurry to get to work—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: I understand—

WITNESS: —so I didn't take the time.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay, and so you told him, and your assumption was that he would perhaps get out and—

WITNESS: I fully expected he would, yes.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay.

WITNESS: But as far as I know, he did not.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay.

WITNESS: Now the man in the white box truck, I don't know his license plate or anything like that, but—I'm thinking a Chevrolet or a Ford—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay, and—

WITNESS: A 30- or 36-footer.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: —that stayed behind the bus—

WITNESS: It was behind the bus when I stopped the bus. Now, after I left, and this lane opened up, he may have—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: May have gone around?

WITNESS: —Might have gone around. I'm not sure.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay.

DEPUTY FEINGLAS: You said that when you first saw him, you got in front of him, and it was right by where the wall started? Which would be about—about Molloy Bridge?

WITNESS: Right. And there was just—I say the CTB wall was here (gesturing), and we actually might have went—I'm guessing 400 or maybe 500 feet before I stopped him—Got him stopped. But it was—the crest of the hill right there where the CTB wall is, we had just went over the crest of the hill, and I'm—It wasn't very far at all.

DEPUTY FEINGLAS: Okay.

WITNESS: I went back to the scene yesterday and today, just to kind of refresh my memory, and I seen where you all wrote on the barrier wall “start”—and somewhere, from that point back, to the crest of the hill, is where I stopped him—so—

MR. KOLLY: Well—Well, what would you guess is the —what would you guess is the distance from where you stopped him to where you saw that word “start”?

WITNESS: I would say it was within 400 foot, where that mark is, somewhere within that—400 feet south of that mark. Yeah, I would say south of that mark, anywhere from a hundred to 400 foot—I mean, I didn't really get a marker on the wall—

MR. KOLLY: Just a guess, though—you say 400 feet or so?

WITNESS: Right.

MR. KOLLY: Okay.

WITNESS: But I do feel like the bus traveled in that left lane before it was (inaudible) —trying to get off the highway.

MR. KOLLY: Thank you.

—If you think back to the axle being—When you say the axle, what do you mean by—

WITNESS: Well, I—what I seen was the axle drum itself, I seen the wheel was—but behind that, the drum was probably 20 inches, and that whole area was glowing red.

MR. KOLLY: So what was be—what was behind the wheel, that you saw red behind the wheel?

WITNESS: Right. Behind the rim of the—axle. Which I assume, would have been a brake lining.

MR. KOLLY: And that's as you passed along, so you looked to the left?

WITNESS: Right. I looked out my window at his wheel, and because it was throwing sparks all over. And as soon as I pulled up and my window got right next to his wheel, and I glanced over, I—got to stop him. So—

MR. KOLLY: Did you happen to notice if there was any—anything any other places,
or—that were red, or fire, or anything—

WITNESS: That's the only thing that I noticed being red, and I could not see and did not
check the left rear axle, when I got out to talk to him and I—could have, I should
have taken a little more time and—to make sure he understood what I was talking
about.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Well, you had no way of knowing, you know—

WITNESS: Well, no—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: —ultimately, what would happen—and the fact
that you tried, I think, was—

WITNESS: I been around a lot of truck drivers—rode the bus a few times, and most bus
drivers are more conscientious than what I seen. Yeah.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Was there anything else about the bus driver that
you noticed?

WITNESS: When he looked at me his eyes were—I would say—rather large. Like—
surprised.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Surprised?

DEPUTY FEINGLAS: Surprised that you stopped him, or—

WITNESS: —Or wondering what I was stopping him for, or something. That's about
the only thing I noticed was his eyes looked like—"What have I done?" So—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER (To Mr. Kolly): Joe, do you think you have a good
understanding of where this was—where he stopped him?

MR. KOLLY: Yeah, well—

WITNESS: I mean, if we can go back there—I don't mind going back up there if we need to do that—

MR. KOLLY: Well, if you're saying it's around 400 foot or so, then—you know, the—where they wrote "start" right on that—that divider that you were talking about—

WITNESS: Right, the barrier wall. Right. You wrote "start" there, and I seen where the—you had brake marks and stuff like that, and I'm not sure that was brake marks, I think it was—well, marks where that axle was freezing—the drum was freezing the axle.

MR. KOLLY: Did you—Is there something about that spot that you think you could pinpoint the exact spot that—

WITNESS: Well, when I went back I was on the—the shoulder of the road, and I never crossed the highway or anything. I remember crossing near the joint in the pavement, and there's about a half-inch difference when you—and I went over to that joint, before he stopped. Now I don't know how far that—I don't remember that bump—I don't know how far that would have been before we stopped, but—
It (inaudible at 0:13:12).

MR. KOLLY: And would you have any reason to believe that anything else was wrong with the bus—Did you hear anything or smell anything—or anything like that?

WITNESS: I didn't have my window—my air conditioner was going—

MR. KOLLY: When you got out.

WITNESS: —but I didn't smell anything, but—I mean the wheel was bright orange, is the best way I can describe it. It's—maybe like looking at the sun, basically.



MR. KOLLY: And after you got—after you left him, you believe he left shortly thereafter—within minutes thereafter?

WITNESS: Looking in my rear-view mirror, I think that he proceeded shortly after I started pulling off. Of course, it could have been me, looking in the rear-view mirror—but I really feel like he drove—started driving very shortly—I mean after I pulled away. —I mean, I could be—I'm not real sure about that but I think that's right. I really feel like he was—Did you all talk to the lady in the orange pantsuit?

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: We've not yet spoken with her, I believe I know who that is—we've not yet spoke with her but—we do have arrangements to do so. She's rather shaken up by the whole thing, and—

WITNESS: Oh, I'm sure—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: —And we're giving her a little bit of time, but we do plan to speak with her.

MR. KOLLY: If he didn't leave after you pulled him over, let's say, where you had stopped or whatever, he was in the lane so he would have been blocking traffic, and you would have been pulling away—

WITNESS: Right.

MR. KOLLY: —A delay of some sort, and then do you recall any—any disruption like that, or is that why you think, maybe, that—that he was pulling away, or—?

WITNESS: Ah, the lane was—clear for, I don't know, 15 seconds, from the time I got in my truck, and started it, I looked in my rearview mirror, and he was still sitting in his seat—I started pulling up and—make—my lane was clear, and I looked up

again and checked my mirror and at that point, that's when I felt like he was moving, but I wasn't sure.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Now, at the time when you were talking with him through the window, did you notice if—at any point—the door to the bus opened?

WITNESS: No.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: No it didn't—or no, you didn't notice?

WITNESS: No, I didn't notice, but I don't believe it did.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay.

WITNESS: I think I would have—I think I would have heard it, or seen—or seen some kind of reflection, because I was looking at his face, which put him almost in line with the door, and I would have seen it open.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay.

MR. KOLLY: Do you recall if he—when you were talking to him, do you recall if the bus was running, or did he turn it off?

WITNESS: There was so much noise on the highway, I really—I mean, all of the cars passing—that I couldn't say.

MR. KOLLY: You—you mentioned—I'm not familiar with the area around here, but you mentioned—you got behind him in Trumbull? Is that a town?

WITNESS: Right, it's—Trumbull would be between Palmer and Ferris.

MR. KOLLY: So when you first saw sparks, to where you pulled him over, how many—how many miles was that?

WITNESS: Aw, shoot—probably four or five—no more than that, because I went through Ferris, so that was probably six or seven miles—And I'm guessing on

that, it might have been farther south, when I started seeing sparks. But I'm real confident that by that time it was—definitely—I know it had been—I had been behind the bus, probably, a total of—I don't know, ten or twelve minutes from the time I had seen it sparking, until the time that I actually got in front of it.

MR. KOLLY: Was it just a few sparks, or was it a shower of sparks?

WITNESS: No, now when it first –When I first, like I said, it looked like exhaust sparks coming out, and at that point—and that was—I was probably behind—I don't know— a minute, a minute and a half.

DEPUTY FEINGLAS: So you wouldn't say it was like a shower of sparks—

WITNESS: No—No. I never seen a shower of sparks, even when I got up beside him. All I seen was the glow.

MR. KOLLY: When you saw the sparks, were they—did they appear to be coming from any particular area on the bus?

WITNESS: On the right side, the—I actually thought it was coming out the exhaust pipe, but I didn't even see which—where the exhaust pipe was on the bus, but I just assumed that—it was probably the exhaust.

MR. KOLLY: Coming from the right side, high or low—

WITNESS: No, low—like a bus—the bottom of the bus—

MR. KOLLY: Were they every few seconds, like something falling off, or was it just like—

WITNESS: No, it was more like—small sparks—about five seconds, ten seconds apart.

DEPUTY FEINGLAS: Because Trumbull—shortly before the accident, in that area, they had a grass fire. Could these sparks have started that grass fire?

WITNESS: They were—there was—

DEPUTY FEINGLAS: Were there enough?

WITNESS: —That's possible. Very possible.

DEPUTY FEINGLAS: Okay.

MR. KOLLY: Thank you.

WITNESS: If you all have more questions, or something comes up, feel free to call me.

We can meet up somewhere, or meet out here, or whatever.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: This has actually been very, very helpful. I think you have a very good memory—

WITNESS: Well, something like that sticks in your mind.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Yes. This is—I think, gives us a much better idea of some of the things that might have led up to what eventually happened. And, you know, certainly, I think it's great that you stopped, and risked being late for work, to see if you could help, and I think—

WITNESS: Aw, I should have stayed and—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: You know what, I think, even had the driver understood what you had said and stopped—you could not have known at that time what eventually was going to happen.

WITNESS: Well, hindsight's 20/20, but I should have said it in Spanish. I could have stumbled through it enough to make him understand.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Do you—do you speak Spanish at all?

WITNESS: Ah, some—

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Just a little?

WITNESS: I could have told him—robo caliente –and pointed toward the rear of the bus.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: But when you saw him, there was no fire yet at that point?

WITNESS: No, there was no fire after—when I looked at my rearview mirror, I think I would have noticed an explosion or anything like that.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Or even smoke—

WITNESS: Right.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: So you had seen in your mirror the bus, and at that point, things still looked—

WITNESS: Yeah, they were still normal.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: Okay.

WITNESS: —And the first that I realized that there was any problem—was when I saw the sheriff's car, the police car, cut across—I'm thinking it was Pleasant Run—or, the road south of that.

MR. KOLLY: In the time that you were behind the truck—or the bus—was the traffic stop and go then, or was it—

WITNESS: We were traveling at a—almost a steady 45 miles an hour.

MR. KOLLY: Okay.

WITNESS: There wasn't any—I never had to stop. I changed lanes a few times, and that's where the bus got ahead of me, because I switched lanes thinking I was—

MR. KOLLY: So, if you're thinking about the braking that the bus must have engaged in during the time you were behind him, can you describe—you know, you would

have had to have accomplished a similar amount of braking if you were going about 45—

WITNESS: Very little.

MR. KOLLY: So, not a lot.

WITNESS: No. The speed varied maybe three to four miles an hour. All the way from Ennis it was almost 45, and never over 45, 48 miles an hour. The only time I possibly got over 50 was found a blank space and moved up a spot.

INVESTIGATOR SIND-PRUNIER: I think this was really helpful, and you do have our cards—if something occurs to you that we haven't asked about, and you feel it might be important, by all means, feel free to give any of us a call. And we really do appreciate your coming forward and taking the time to meet with us. This will be very—very, very useful to us.

Transcribed by P. Sind-Prunier